

Compassionate Society

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Young People as Fundamental Social, Economic and Political Transformation Facilitators :
To Create a Just and Equitable Society that provides Dignified Existence for All People

India's economic growth story of the past two decades has a recurrent theme, of accentuating insecurities for millions. Yet, there is a deep divide over how to distribute the fruits of its economic growth. How best to plough back the gains to achieve equality and social protection for everyone?

Despite India's status as a middle-income country, close to 350 million people live in absolute poverty. According to an affidavit presented to the Supreme Court in 2011, an estimated 30 percent of the people are poor. This calculation was based on the Tendulkar Committee Report; a government body tasked with the definition of an adequate poverty line for India. A great deal of debate followed thereafter, on this definition; screening the more critical questions. How do these 350 million people survive on INR 32 per person per day in urban areas and INR 26 per person per day in rural areas? how do they find resources in times of illness, old age, disability and death? And how can they protect themselves from slipping into deeper poverty?

Social welfare pensions or non-contributory pension schemes may be one way to deal with the critical condition of the impoverished elderly. According to a recent ILO report, less than a fourth of India's population above the statutory pensionable age don't receive any kind of pension.¹ The NSAP (National Social Assistance Program) which was the first pension program for the poor was launched in 1995; providing a pension of Rs. 75 per month. A similar program was started as a support for impoverished widowed women. Under India's federal structure of government, both Central and state governments share the financial burden for the program. In several states of India, the welfare pension amounts have been revised upwards; with northern states such as Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar providing between INR 400-300 per month; and Southern states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh providing INR 1000 per month to destitute, widowed women and elderly. Though laudable in purpose, such pensions are variable and limited in scope, covering a narrow slice of eligible elderly and other distressed groups.

Most poor people in the country today are working adults, employed in the informal sector. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) set up in 2004 came up with the not so surprising findings that over 91 percent of all workers in India are employed in the informal sector. Only 8 per cent of India's workforce received formal social security benefits, while 79 percent of

¹The International Labour Organization's World Social Protection Report 2014-15

informal sector workers lived on an income of less than Rupees 20 a day (NCEUS 2009). Clearly, the gains of growth seem to have bypassed or yet to reach majority of the working population.

Moreover, the Commission highlighted that there had been almost no growth in formal employment, since the early nineties. Almost all growth in employment took place in the unorganized sector since 1991. If economic globalization is to improve peoples' wellbeing and not bring them severe hardship, then the working poor needed social protection. A proposed national minimum security package for all unorganized sector workers that includes social insurance, social assistance for life and health, and old age benefits to all workers that was recommended by the NCEUS costs less than 0.5 percent of the Nation's GDP. The NDA Government is working on this recommendation.

India has low insurance penetration compared with other emerging economies. According to recent data from the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India, life insurance density in India increased from 9.1 in 2001 to 55.7 in 2010 and came down to 41% in 2013. Similarly, health insurance coverage fell by 15% between 2010-11 and 2013-14 to 216 million. This recent decline in population protected by health insurance is amongst persons covered by government health insurance schemes (Jain 2014). A study conducted in 2011 showed that health shocks added 4.4 percentage points to India's poverty headcount ratio in 2004-05 (Ghosh 2011). That is, 47 million people fell into destitution because of high out-of-pocket medical costs (ibid). This is a grim enough official picture, but how close to people's reality is this understanding of poverty?

The official poverty line based on minimum calorie intake counts includes only 22 percent of the people as poor. In this exercise of exclusion, only those in the most abject circumstances make the grade. Even a cursory scan of India's human development indicators suggests a more widespread malaise; that newer benchmarks such as the Empowerment Line, developed by the McKinsey Global Institute capture more accurately. The Empowerment Line calculates the cost for an Indian household to attain basics needs, and compares these with actual consumption data, to measure level of unmet needs (Dobbs, 2014).² Based on the Empowerment Line, 56 percent or 680 million Indians cannot meet their basic needs; floating somewhere above the poverty line threshold with only a tenuous grip on minimal standards of living, unable to withstand smallest of contingencies. While hunger is a daily fact of life for the poorest of the poor; 40 to 60 percent of the population lack access to basic entitlements such as health care, drinking water, and sanitation (ibid). There is an urgent need to broaden ways of assessing deprivation and vulnerability.

Poverty and vulnerability might deepen, even as the nation forges ahead in economic growth. However, this future is not inevitable. India is a democracy with a vibrant civil society, coalition politics, and an active press; and increasing evidence and realization that wealth creation without addressing deep-rooted inequalities is an insufficient progress. As a consequence, a scramble for policy solutions has been seen in the past two decades. Consecutive political regimes starting from 2000 have introduced a series of social protection and welfare measures; embedded in a largely rights based legal frameworks.

²Richard Dobbs and Anu Madgavkar, 2014

(1). Collective Hopes

Poverty reduction in the country depends on success in three key strategic sectors: non-farm job creation, faster growth in agricultural productivity, and more effective delivery of services. For all three, it is important to strengthen participatory democracy through local self-governance institutions at the rural and urban areas; and empower women and men at the grassroots through collective efforts to lead the country's transformation (Radhakrishna 2015). For India to be the hope for the world, it has to deepen participatory democracy by fostering the emergence of strong and capable collectives of farmers and women who innovate in agriculture and non-farm employment.

Diversification of employment opportunities and household income sources, with the transition to an industrial economy led to poverty reduction in many East and South East Asian countries (Barker and Dawe 2001). Such pathways may not automatically emerge for India, where a large number of poor continue to depend on marginal and unirrigated land holdings. Reducing poverty clearly depends on increasing productivity of existing agricultural holdings, and expanding and diversification of the rural non-farm sector. At present, though the agricultural sector continues to face substantial challenges due to costs, poor market opportunities, environmental risks and uncertainties. To address these challenges, farmers are organizing themselves into collectives and diversifying agriculture; and creating livelihoods through a spirit of entrepreneurship.

Close to 70 percent of small holders in India farm limited land holdings of less than one hectare. The proportion of marginal holdings has grown from nine percent in the seventies, to 22 percent by 2011³. Under such circumstances, a considerable challenge lies ahead to make farming gainful. Clear policies on consolidating farm holdings, building farmers' collectives, innovative and cost effective solutions to promote production and marketing, and farmers' access to various markets are needed (NABARD 2014). Technological innovations are critical for agricultural growth, but safeguarding smallholder livelihoods require additional strategies.

(1.1) Farmer Collectives

Farmers Collectives and Farmer Producer Organizations play a critical role in enabling farm and non-farm employment as demonstrated in several villages in Osmanabad district, western state of Maharashtra.

To keep themselves secure, solvent and live sustainably, small farmers in drought-prone areas need access to information, inputs at affordable prices, ability to market and negotiate prices for their produce, and a say in agricultural policy making. In 2012, a determined district administration and NGO supported peoples' groups financed by NABARD and public sector banks began the process of fostering Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) and Companies (FPCs) in Osmanabad administrative district of Maharashtra. A review of this program commissioned by the state government found that collectivization of farmers resulted in crop diversification including the much needed shift from water intensive sugarcane, local production of seeds, improved agricultural productivity, and increased non-farm employment in enterprises run by farmers self-help groups (Swain et al 2015).

³Source: Agricultural Census of India, 2010-11, Department of Agriculture.

According to this study, an experiment in one village swiftly moved to integrate a large number of villages where small and marginal farmers organized themselves into Producer Groups to engage in transformative action based on state-community-market / public-private models that can change lives of smallholders in the country. These collectives effectively reduced input costs for higher quality products and secured better markets for their current agricultural produce. In addition, they also invested in new enterprises such as floriculture suitable to their ecology. The Osmanabad model demonstrated the gains of collective farmer efforts that have galvanized the non-farm sector. Not only are local farmers diversifying their livelihoods to dairy, seed production, and food processing; a large number of small enterprises from school uniform shops to hair cutting salons have emerged in the villages; with the residents filled with a unique sense of inspiration and empowerment.

Another study of producer organizations in India by FAO (Thagat, 2016) highlighted similar advantages provided by FPOs to small rural producers: reduction in input costs, increased farmer capabilities to identify and participate in the profitable market opportunities; intensification of cropping under rain-fed conditions through methods such as in-situ water conservation, organic farming; and low dependence on external agricultural inputs. Thus, smallholders graduate from subsistence orientation to more profitable micro-enterprises. In short, FPOs are uniquely located to serve both goals of social equity given that many of them start with the social goals of reaching out to the poor, addressing rural indebtedness, and reducing environmental degradation; as well as the goals of tangible economic profitability resulting in their gaining the confidence.

(1.2) The Self-Help Group (SHG) movement

Women have organized themselves into self-help groups (SHGs) to create diversified and sustainable forms of livelihoods and entrepreneurship; initially as Thrift and Credit Groups promoted by the NGOs, later facilitated by Micro Credit Agencies, and now the Government of India supported National Livelihood Missions for Rural and Urban areas. Recent programs such as the SHG-Bank Linkage Program (BLP) are now expanding to reach out to 100 million women (NABARD 2016). SHG-BLP aims to effect social empowerment by supporting financial skill development in women SHG members, so that they may emerge as micro-entrepreneurs.

Under the Micro Enterprise Development Program (MEDP) of National Bank for agriculture and Rural development (NABARD) launched a decade ago; 347,000 SHG members have been trained in different skill-sets. In 2016, the number of SHGs that were linked to banks increased to 7.9 million. Alignment between NABARD and NRLM/SRLM (National and State Rural Livelihood Missions) ensured that more SHGs received loans. Since 2013, NRLM has been working with its agenda to enable 70 million rural poor households to attain sustainable livelihoods through self-managed SHGs and federations (Thagat, 2016, RBI 2014).

SHGs and their Federations have already demonstrated their criticality across the country in collectivizing women, generating rural livelihoods, and impacting poverty. The Kerala model of women's collectives – Kudumbashree – is an example of large scale SHG organizing that has created income generation opportunities as well as contributing to social development. Women members of SHGs across the country are involved in operating a range of micro-businesses including beauty salons,

dairy and vermin-compost units, street food vending, candle making, and mushroom cultivation. For women, becoming entrepreneurs opened a different dimension in their lives. For some, it has alleviated the drudgery of travelling long distances for petty jobs and freedom from economic hardship. For others, it increased their confidence and enabled them to participate more equally in addressing collective concerns of their families and communities.

(1.3) Strong and Participatory Local Self Governments

Under the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, states are empowered to take steps to organize village panchayats; and endow them with the necessary powers so that they may function as units of local self-government. As with the 74th Amendment, states are mandated to enact the Panchayati Raj law; and in some, this has seen the emergence of strong laws to establish elected self-government at the village level. The elected body along with the Gram Sabha (village council constituted by all adult members enrolled in the electoral lists) have the power to develop social and economic development plans for the village (VDP) in a participatory and inclusive manner, access programs and schemes of the Central and State Governments, and facilitate convergence and implementation of the plans (Planning Commission 2012).

The Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) brought local self-governments to areas inhabited by tribal people (Scheduled Areas), so designated under article 244 of the Indian constitution. The principle of 'free and prior informed consent' (FPIC) enshrined in international agreements for some years, and reiterated strongly in the recent UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is yet to be incorporated in domestic legislations in India. Some elements of FPIC have been incorporated to The Forest Rights Act 2008 and the PESA; that provide for consultations with tribal communities; particularly relevant where competing demands on land impinge on their rights. A key recent development is the increased financial autonomy of Gram Panchayats, with the proposed release of grants through the Fourteenth Central Finance Commission; removing a critical stumbling block in local self-governance.

The reservation of at least one third of the seats to women through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 in local government institutions aims to address widespread gender inequality in the political leadership our country. Now numerically, India has more number of elected women representatives (EWRs) than anywhere else in the world. A recent appraisal report by the ministry of Panchayati Raj counted 1.3 million women serving as EWRs in the local self-government institutions (PRI); constituting about 37 percent of all elected members. What is even more promising is that in a few States, the mandatory quota for reservation has been increased to 50%.

While numbers are a starting point, real empowerment wherein women lead community well-being will require greater efforts from all stakeholders. Some challenges in implementing the 73rd amendment include inadequate clarity of functions, absence of funds at the gram panchayats, elite capture of institutions, and lack of capacities of elected representatives to perform constitutionally mandated tasks. In addition, elected women leaders face serious barriers resulting from lack of experience and societal and patriarchal bias. The operationalization of a new layer of women functionaries has also been quite challenging in many states.

Evidence from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and other states reveals that political empowerment of elected women has helped enhance their self-esteem, confidence, and ability to command respect from their families and society; and those who start as proxy representatives eventually evolve into proactive people's representatives. Evidence from States with empowered EWRs show that they are more focused on development issues like health, education and livelihoods that tend to be overlooked by men.

However, EWRs need support in terms of information and mentorship to take effective decisions. Despite numerous training programs initiated by the State, some in association with civil society organizations, there are grave shortfalls in this mammoth capacity building task. State training institutions provide regular training to elected PRI members on their roles and responsibilities of PRIs, the administrative structure of the three-tier panchayat system, transparency and accountability, financial management and accounting, rural development programs and fund allocation, and social welfare schemes of line departments. Apart from this, attention also has to be given to the principles and strategies of good governance, sustainability and livelihoods; as well as to the nurturance of individual and collective aspirations through peer learning such as exposure visits.

Recently, the Government of India's National Commission for Women (NCW) has reiterated the critical need to invest in the capacity building of the EWRs. Educational institutions have been invited by the NCW and Ministry of Women and Child Development to develop innovative curriculum and training modules for this capacity building across the country (MoWCD 2016). In addition, state governments, corporates and private trusts are willing to finance the training of village volunteers and facilitators. These facilitators would enable the realization of accountable and efficient local government systems; to plan, implement and administer local development programs and model village initiatives.

Just now, there is a great deal of dynamism, not to mention optimism, in the basket of initiatives to nurture the grassroots leadership capabilities to effect social and economic development. Kudumbashree,⁴ the Poverty Eradication Mission for the Indian State of Kerala, provides an interesting snapshot of current poverty alleviation practices; and the underlying relations between collectives of citizens, the local self-government, and a dynamic 'political society'. Implemented in the state of Kerala, this has broader relevance to contemporary trends in the management of poverty elsewhere across the country and the global south. This is in two specific ways: it emphasizes poor people's involvement in their own 'uplift'; and it directly links poverty alleviation programs with participatory forms of governance. At the heart of Kudumbashree is the organization of poor women into neighbourhood groups (NHGs) supported by and engaging with the local state; with the goal of improving participants' economic wellbeing, and furthering their empowerment (Government of India, 2008: 90–94). It resonates with trends in international policy where such 'active citizenship has become the privileged object of development imaginaries' (Robins et al., 2008)

⁴Much attention is given to mechanisms to build poor people's social capital within poverty alleviation programs, or to the institutional design of spaces in which poor people's participation is promoted, but rather less attention is given to the power-laden contexts within which such interventions are to take place. Despite the fact that 'active citizens' are the intended beneficiaries (and outcomes) of state-of-the-art poverty reduction programs, analysis of the relations between the interventions through which poor and marginalized people are to achieve this empowerment and existing power structure and unaccountable governance make things difficult.

(1.4). Investing in the Future Generation to facilitate transformation

Beyond grist of the mill of economic success of a few, could the youth also become dynamic agents of positive social change of the country and the world? Do they, more than their forebears, understand and feel compassion towards the suffering of others; fellow humans treading similar paths in the closely intertwined, globalized world? How can they be skillfully employed in the world in future, and use their very large demographic dividend to transform societies in just ways?

The Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellows Scheme is an example of a programme of deploying skilled and committed development facilitators on the ground to realize the promise of the excellent legal and policy frameworks for decentralized development in India. Conflict situations highlight concerns about adequacy of grassroots level governance in India. Presence of conflict in the country can broadly be viewed through the lens of rising inequalities and disparities, displacement and dispossession; as is amply evidenced in literature across the world. It also lends urgency to reach development gains to people living in poverty in remote villages in the country. The pattern of growth in the Indian development scenario – as in other developed and emerging economies - seems to have left behind a large number of people in mineral rich, remote tribal and rural areas, dispossessed from their homes and livelihoods creating severe insecurity. The increased violence taking the form of Left Wing Extremism (LWE) is supposedly aimed at reversion of the disruption in lives and other losses experienced by the impoverished tribal inhabitants of these areas⁵

One of the effects of longstanding internal conflicts is a breakdown in communication between the state and local population. The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India (GoI) and with state governments initiated the Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellows Scheme (PMRDFs) with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences as the knowledge partner. This programme focused on poverty reduction and improving the lives of the people in Left Wing Extremism affected districts by deploying energetic and competent young professionals. These Fellows were mandated to provide decision support to district administration and instill confidence among key responsibility holders to work together for the social and economic transformation of conflict affected areas and communities (PMRDF 2014). From 2012-14, 300 dynamic young people worked in the fellowship in 111 conflict districts in 18 states on core development issues. At the end of the period, many of the Fellows moved on to work state governments and other development organizations.

The experience of PMRDF and other fellowship programs show that a few million young people could be trained and placed to work with Panchyat Raj institutions and communities across the country to plan and deliver various development programs. For instance, committed and competent Village Development Facilitators (VDFs, like the PMRDFs) can play a critical role in realizing goals of priority public programs such as health, nutrition, drinking water and sanitation in local communities; as well as shoulder the significant human resources and finance management tasks of PRIs. In addition to strengthening governance and enabling policy convergence on the ground, such investments in identifying and building capacities of local change agents can also contribute to the collectivization of

⁵According to Government of India, Home Ministry: From 2010 - 2015 an estimated 2162 civilians and 802 security force personnel have lost their lives in the LWE conflict areas -http://mha.nic.in/naxal_new

citizens, expansion and diversification livelihoods, and emergence of entrepreneurship towards value-added local produce and non-farm employment.

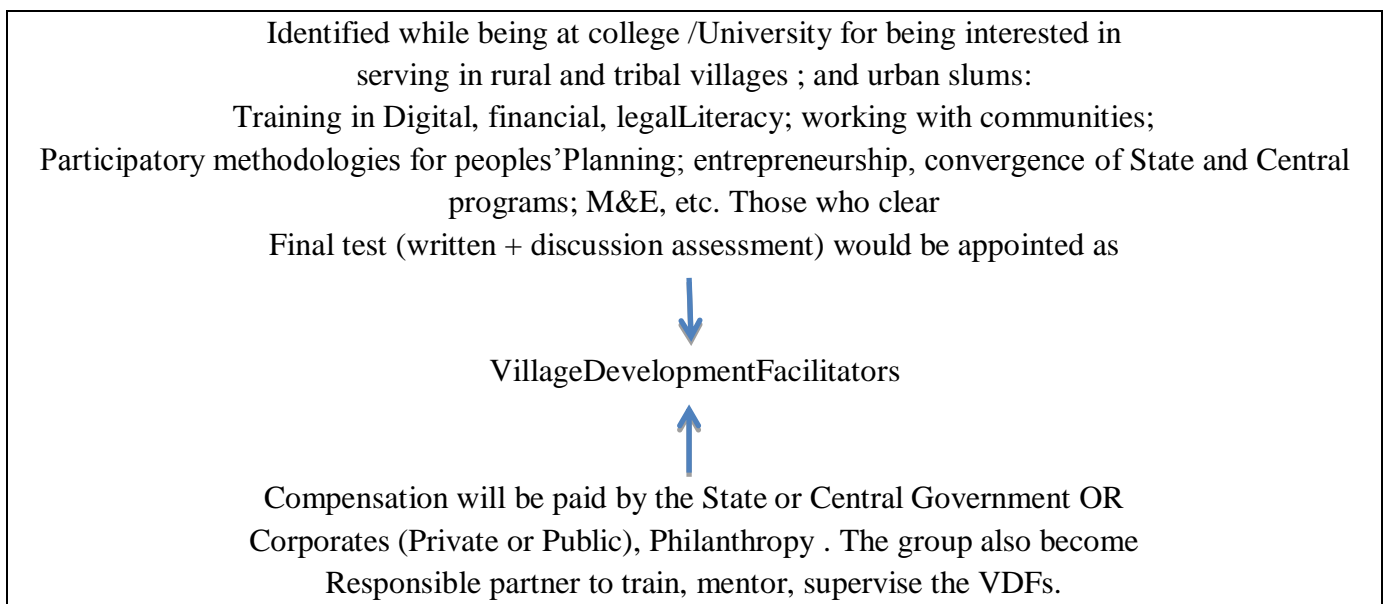
The task of empowering local leadership and enabling them to work with PRIs and communities is no doubt challenging, especially in an era of shrinking public finances. Alternative models that move beyond ad-hoc project mode must be explored. One possibility is to encourage public and private sector industrial corporations and business houses to adopt specific districts and sub district areas; and support training, deployment and monitoring of village development facilitators.

India adds 12 million people to its workforce annually; of which most do not have any formal skills. Fewer than one in 10 adult Indians had any form of vocational training; and even amongst these, there is mismatch between skills possessed and formal skills sought by employers. Majority of work seekers had a hereditary skill or learnt on the job; with a mere 2.2 per cent had received any formal vocational training. In comparison, 75 per cent of the workforce in Germany and 80 per cent in Japan have received formal skills training. Even among the BRICS countries, India lags behind: nearly half the Chinese workforce, for example, is skilled (The Hindu 2015).

A recent study indicated that 119.2 million skilled personnel would be required in 24 key sectors by 2022. By 2020, almost 60 per cent of India’s population of 1.3 billion will be in the working age group of 15-59 years. Present workforce data shows that 51 percent of an estimated 487.4 million working age adults are employed in the non-farm sector. This is likely to be the trend in the future (NSDC, 2014). Adequately skilled workforce is the need of the hour; if this demographic development is to be a positive force; and not result in catastrophic deprivation.

GRAND TOTAL	District 618	Block 6618	Gram Panchayats 248255
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India has 4,143 Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), of which 12 are Municipal Corporations (MCs), 1,482 are municipalities and 2,349 are Nagar Panchayats (NPs) (i.e. Notified Area Councils that are in transition from rural to urban areas)



In the 1st phase, 1.5 million young people from universities and colleges should be trained and placed in each of the Gram Panchayats; and Urban Self Government wards (47618 in urban wards) in all States and Union Territories. The University / College in the local area participate in working with the villages in “Service Learning” model. This is also to inculcate the responsibility of young people to improve condition of all people.

The overall development of rural and tribal areas and slums in urban areas – where the vulnerable groups gain informed capacity to engage in participatory decision-making processes and gain overall and sustained access to social security and development support. The vision of this initiative is to inculcate the idea of sustained engagement of youth in development and social security of the poor and vulnerable individuals, groups and communities to create a just and equitable society.

The aforesaid initiative will lead to development of compassionate society where one prioritizes empathy, kindness, and care for its members. It is a society where individuals and institutions actively work to alleviate suffering, promote well-being, and ensure equal opportunities for all. In a compassionate society, people recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every human being and strive to create a supportive and inclusive environment for everyone to thrive.

The key characteristics and values that are often associated with a compassionate society is not limited to :

Empathy and Understanding: A compassionate society encourages individuals to understand and relate to the experiences, challenges, and emotions of others. It fosters a culture of empathy, where people seek to listen, learn, and support one another.

Social Justice and Equality: Compassion goes hand in hand with social justice and equality. A compassionate society strives to eliminate discrimination, prejudice, and systemic injustices that prevent individuals from realizing their full potential. It promotes fairness and equal opportunities for all members, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances.

Care and Support: Compassion involves showing care and support for those who are vulnerable, marginalized, or in need. A compassionate society provides resources, services, and policies that address the well-being of its members, including healthcare, education, social services, and safety nets.

Collaboration and Cooperation: A compassionate society values collaboration and cooperation over competition and division. It encourages individuals, communities, and organizations to work together towards common goals, pooling resources and expertise to create positive change.

Environmental Stewardship: A compassionate society recognizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment. It promotes sustainable practices, conservation, and responsible use of natural resources to ensure a healthy and thriving planet for future generations.

Education and Awareness: Compassion is cultivated through education and awareness. A compassionate society emphasizes the importance of education that fosters empathy, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-making. It also encourages critical thinking and questioning of societal norms and structures.

Volunteerism and Service: In a compassionate society, individuals are encouraged to give back to their communities through volunteerism and service. People actively engage in acts of kindness, support charitable causes, and contribute their time and skills to improve the lives of others.

Restorative Justice: Compassion recognizes the potential for growth and change in individuals who have caused harm. A compassionate society emphasizes restorative justice approaches that focus on repairing harm, healing relationships, and supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders.

Conclusion: Building a compassionate society requires a collective effort from individuals, communities, and institutions. By promoting compassion as a core value and integrating it into our social, economic, and political systems, we can create a more just, inclusive, and caring world for everyone.